

Dragonflies of the Ottawa-Gatineau Region

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Species Profile 4

The Dragonhunter (*Hagenius brevistylus*)

Family: Gomphidae



Hagenius brevistylus, the Dragonhunter.

The amazing Dragonhunter is the largest dragonfly you will likely encounter in our region and certainly one of the most exciting. Many an odonate enthusiast has this as their number one must-see species. In our region, only the Swamp Darner is larger, but it is a rarely seen species hereabouts. As the name implies, the Dragonhunter hunts other dragonflies, be they large or small, and is a formidable hunter. For this, it is well equipped with huge, long legs that end in sickle-like hooks.

ID Hints

- Very large black and yellow dragonfly
- Bulky thorax with a rather tiny head for its size
- The tip of the abdomen is curved downward and this becomes more pronounced in flight
- Very large, long black legs



*The long and powerful legs of the Dragonhunter.
Note the grabbing talons!*

Many species of dragonfly are wait-and-pounce predators, but the Dragonhunters like to take their prey from above. Prey as large as Monarch Butterflies and large skimmer dragonflies are easily carried in those long legs. Amazingly, there are even verified records of this species catching (though not eating) Ruby-throated Hummingbirds. As formidable as they are, they prey on smaller insects more often than large. Small moths are eaten on the go. The Ebony Jewelwing damselfly, which is often found in the same habitat, is heavily preyed upon by Dragonhunters. Discarded Jewelwing wings, floating on the water, often give away the presence of the Dragonhunter. Despite this dragon's reputation, it is not one of the more aggressive dragonflies. Though very territorial with other Dragonhunters, they seem to tolerate other dragonfly species quite readily and tend to leave them alone unless actively hunting. I've often seen them routed from perches along the shoreline by the smaller but more assertive Slaty Skimmer.



*Dragonhunter
with Widow
Skimmer prey.
Photo courtesy
of Gillian
Mastromatteo.*

Possible Confusable – The Black-shouldered Spinylegs

Most field guides will write that it is hard to confuse the Dragonhunter with any other species. As distinct as they may be when examined closely, this is not how insects are usually observed in the field.

Locally, the closest confusable would be the Black-shouldered Spinylegs (*Dromogomphus spinosus*). It is the only other local clubtail with a pronounced downward curve at the tip of the abdomen, though not quite as extreme in flight as that of the Dragonhunter. It has similar green eyes as an adult, but its head is more proportionate to its body size than is that of the Dragonhunter.



← *Black-shouldered Spinylegs adult. Note the sharp leg spines that are distinct to this species. Though the abdomen has a pronounced curve near the end, it is not as extreme as in the Dragonhunter.*

There are many similarities between these two species. The habitat preferences are somewhat the same, and both species are fond of sitting on ferns and vegetation that overhang water as well as on rocks in the water. However, while Dragonhunters can show strong fidelity to stick perches and are quite approachable, Black-shouldered Spinylegs are, on the contrary, somewhat skittish, and I've never observed one sitting on a stick perch in the water.

Like most clubtails, Black-shouldered Spinylegs are yellow and black when they are in their teneral stage. (Teneral is the term given to odonates when they have emerged from their shed skin and are flight capable.) As they age, they turn a dullish green. The Dragonhunter, meanwhile, remains in a sharp suit of contrasting black and yellow.



A teneral Black-shouldered Spinylegs. It is as a teneral that I think it is most easily confused with the larger Dragonhunter.

When and Where to Look for Dragonhunters

Dragonhunters usually start to emerge in mid-June, often in large numbers. At that time, they can be seen easily in the proper habitat. However, the life of a newly emerged dragonfly is fraught with peril and a great many succumb to the ravages of wind or rain or an awkward first flight that lands them in the water.



← *Teneral Dragonhunter with wing damage. This specimen landed in the water on its first flight. I rescued it and watched it while it dried off. Though it did fly off its flight was awkward. In this shape it would likely have had difficulty trying to secure prey.*

After emergence, they are found in much smaller numbers. It is best to search for this species in June and July; they are certainly on the wane in August. Although I found one individual in September, that was in a year with a very delayed summer.

Dragonhunters prefer clean, fresh lakes and good-sized, clear running streams. You will not likely encounter them at ponds or (stagnant) pools. Like with many species of dragonfly, the female is much harder to find than the male, as they tend not to linger at the water where the males are lurking. The many large lakes of Gatineau Park (Meech, Philippe, La Pêche) are ideal for these dragons, as are the various creeks and streams associated with them. There are also a few records for Dragonhunters along the Ottawa River from Morris Island to Petrie Island, but they are generally a more difficult find on the south side of the river.



Dragonhunters don't often perch on blossoms but when they do they do it in style.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my partner, Marie Clausén, for editing my documents, for her company in the field, and for her patience when I'm spending too much time in our outdoor adventures stopping and photographing dragonflies. Thanks also to Paul Lagasi for his photo editing skills in cleaning up a few of the photographs. Also, thanks to Gillian Mastromatteo for the use of her photograph as well as for her company searching both field and stream for odonates. 🦋